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ABSTRACT

Rationales for the college learning center to provide consulting services are considered, along with the literature on learning centers as consultants to the university community. Attention is directed to an actual consultation intervention, in which the learning center at the University of Utah worked with the coordinator and teaching assistant staff of an introductory psychology course. In addition, a consultation model and information on its application are presented. The learning center consultant is a specialized professional, who has expertise in areas such as how students learn, skills that can enhance student learning, and assessment of underachieving students. Potential consultees are from academic departments, college administration, student groups, and other student service agencies. At the University of Utah, the coordinator for the introductory psychology course sought consultation because of the high number of poorly-performing students. The consultation resulted in two interventions consisting of changes in course structure and administration and a direct service presentation to the class. The effect of the changes on student grades was assessed. The consultation model divides the consultation into 12 stages, including initiation/entry, early contract, system overview, assessment, and problem formulation. (SW)

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THE LEARNING CENTER AS CONSULTANT TO THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

Learning Centers on college and university campuses around the country have traditionally been involved in providing a variety of services to students. Their services include teaching classes, providing workshops and tutoring students on how to learn and succeed in school (Maxwell, 1979). For many centers, these activities enable them to serve large numbers of students but tax their resources in staff hours and budget.

For these active Learning Centers, what reason could there be for assuming the additional responsibility of serving as consultant to the various segments of the academic community? And on what topics would it be appropriate for the Learning Center to consult?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the Learning Center as consultant. The authors begin by providing a rationale for Learning Centers taking on this function. This will be followed by a brief review of the literature on Learning Centers as consultants to the university community. An actual consultation intervention will then be described, in which the Learning Center at the University of Utah worked with the coordinator and teaching assistant staff of the Psychology 101 course. Finally, a consultation model will be presented, including stages in its application and suggestions for initiating the process.

RATIONALE

The definition of consultation which the authors are using throughout this paper is as follows: "The consultant (a specialized professional) assists consultees (agency employees who are also professionals) with work-related concerns" (Gallessich, 1982, p. 6). Three important components of this definition are the consultant, the consultee, and the implied collaborative relationship between the two.

In the role of consultant, the Learning Center staff, or selected members of that staff, are specialized professionals. Their areas of expertise include: how students learn, skills and attitudes which can enhance student learning, assessment of deficiencies in underachieving students, and factors in the design and teaching of college classes that can stimulate or serve as

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barriers to student learning. Another potential area of expertise is developmental theory and its application to college students and college teaching. Also, the Learning Center staff is often familiar with research on the students at their institution and may they have conducted their own studies in this area.

Potential Learning Center consultees are almost any members of the university community: academic departments, college administration, student groups, and other student service agencies. These consultees are professionals in their own domains.

Finally, consultation involves the coming together of these two groups of professionals. The consultation process is a collaborative venture in which there is no one expert with all the answers, but rather two parties, consultant and consultee, who bring their expertise together to jointly find answers to the consultee's work-related problem.

Going back to the question raised at the beginning of this paper, why should an overcommitted and understaffed Learning Center consider adding this process of consultation to its list of services? One compelling reason is that many centers are already receiving requests for consultation, often without recognizing it or labeling it as such. For example, residence hall personnel, course instructors, academic advisors and student service agencies frequently contact the Learning Center asking for assistance with the students they service.

A second reason for Learning Centers to be doing consultation is that it would be the most effective way to respond to the above requests. In many of these instances, the Learning Center might choose to transport existing services to these groups, such as a time management workshop to the dorms or a test anxiety program for students on probation. However, if this programming is done as an isolated event rather than as part of a consultation process, it frequently does not meet the needs of the consumers. More collaboration in assessing the needs or problems of the requesting group and looking at alternative solutions would have been more effective.

A third reason for doing consultation is to have the greatest possible impact on students. Learning Centers frequently focus almost exclusively on providing direct services to students. Through consultation, Learning Centers have the opportunity to influence the environment as well, working with

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faculty and staff to make changes in the setting that can enhance the educational outcome (Dohrenwend, 1978). Also, consultation activities allow Learning Centers to reach many more students by working with significant groups, such as faculty, staff and peers, who in turn influence large groups of students directly (Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst, 1974).

A fourth rationale for Learning Center consultation services is the basic issue of the survival of the Learning Centers themselves. These centers frequently operate in a somewhat isolated physical location to which students come for services. Consultation activities move the center staff into the academic mainstream of the university, providing opportunities for interaction with faculty and administrators as well as students. When it comes time for decisions about budget allocations and the continuance of the Learning Center, it is critical that students are not the center's only cheering section.

A final rationale is the Learning Center's mission to the academic community. Learning Centers exist to enhance the students' learning and to further the mission of the college or university in producing well educated, responsible individuals. As noted above, Learning Center staff members have expertise in a number of vital areas related to the education of college students. When the Learning Center functions not just as an educator of students but as a consultant to the whole academic community, it has the opportunity to share this expertise more broadly. Through this process it can share its vision of what that academic community can become, thus taking a more active part in the life and functioning of the institution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A brief review of the literature on Learning Centers provides an apropos narrative of their movement toward providing consultation. Historically, these centers have been the purveyors of direct service methods of improving students' learning skills (e.g., classes, workshops, tutoring). However, consultation provides a promising opportunity to enhance and extend the valuable services Learning Centers typically render.

Since 1916, attempts have been made to improve students' reading and study skills (Enright, 1975). Traditionally, college Learning Centers have been the pioneers of these attempts, using undergraduate reading and study skills

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courses as their vehicle. Some centers have targeted these courses at high risk students. Others have maintained open enrollment. Evidence exists that both types of courses have been effective (Behrman et al., in press; Kirschenbaum and Perri, 1982). However, drawbacks of this approach to improving students' learning skills include, first, that some students fail to transfer the skills they learn to their other courses. Second, some students may fail other courses they are attempting while still learning the skills they need to be successful. And finally, the non-credit nature of many of these courses tends to diminish their inherent value (Harding, 1981).

As a result of these drawbacks, many centers have looked at bringing content area material together with reading and study skills. One method of combining learning skill instruction with content area instruction has been to bring content area material into learning skills classes. Courtney (1968) concluded that students experience improvements in academic performance when study skills and content area material are combined. Other researchers have emphasized the importance of using content area material in reading and writing classes (Cohen, 1973). The alternative method to combining these two areas of instruction has been to take learning skills into the content area courses. (Champaigne, 1980; Faulkner, 1974; Maker, 1979). This alternative implies the beginning of a consultation relationship. Learning Center staff have consulted with content area instructors to teach reading and study strategies specific to their courses as a part of their course curriculum (Cash, 1973; Carney, 1978; Karlin, 1971; O'Hear, 1977; Shepherd, 1979; Stanfill, 1978). One staff member developed a model of a reading and study skills inventory to be used in a variety of content areas courses (Williams and Kaman, 1975). Other Learning Center staff have begun working with high risk courses by making presentations covering general study skills (Craik and Martin, 1980). And still others have worked with content area instructors to develop adjunct courses to be taught by Learning Center staff in conjunction with such freshman level courses as history and biology (Austin and Dean-Guilford, 1981; Moran, 1980; Harding, 1980; Harding, 1981; Rauch, 1969, Tomlinson and Tomlinson, 1975; Wilson, 1978). In addition, special reading and study skills courses have been offered in conjunction with preservice teaching, nursing, and law programs (Gillis and Olson, 1982; Granger, 1982; Mayfield, 1977). Many of these adjunct courses have been found to improve

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students' test scores, grades, study skills, and attitudes (Ba ile, 1981; Gillis and Olson, 1982; Granger, 1982; Moran, 1980; Rauch, 1969; Wilson, 1978).

The results of this alternative method of taking Learning Skills into content area courses have been increased numbers of students served, enhanced visibility of the Learning Center and increased faculty support (Blanc, et. al., 1981). Unfortunately, this alternative has not been free of problems. Learning Centers have had difficulties obtaining referrals, making effective initial contacts, and delivering requested services. An even greater difficulty has been the staff's ability to maintain a collaborative consultant role and avoid getting trapped into a domineering savior role (O'Hear, 1977; Stanfill, 1978). Researchers agree consultation is not easy. Thus the movement of Learning Centers toward consultation has had a rocky beginning. However, the present authors contend that the valuable opportunities available through consultation outweigh the struggles inherent in assuming this additional responsibility.

A CONSULTATION

Description

Certain courses on college campuses can be considered "high risk" due to the rather comprehensive, unfamiliar and difficult subject matter presented in large classes to students in their first or second year of college. Introductory Psychology (Psych 101) at the University of Utah can be considered high risk as the classes are large, the majority of the students are freshmen, the material is unfamiliar to most and the textbook is rather difficult. Many students do not perform as well as they or the instructor might expect. As the literature suggests, this is largely due to the fact that students do not know how to study for these kinds of classes.

Psych 101 is taught at the University of Utah in one 10 week quarter. Information is presented via lecture, films, and the textbook. The lecture component of the course is composed of a series of modules, each taught by a psychology professor who is an expert in the module topic. The course uses the text Introduction to Psychology (8th ed.) by Atkinson, Atkinson & Hilgard. The class meets five days a week for 50 minute periods. Class is held in a large auditorium with approximately 300-400 students per section. A

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student's final grade is determined by scores on 3 exams plus possible extra credit earned by participating in departmental experiments.

In the fall of 1982 the Psych 101 Coordinator expressed concern over the high number of students who did poorly in the course. Consultation began with a meeting between the Psych 101 Coordinator, Psych 101 Teaching Assistant's (T.A.'s) and two members of the Learning Center staff. The purpose of the consultation was to assess the situation, discuss the problem and determine actions. Problems identified included a good but difficult text, a large amount of material to cover in a short period of time, the fact that very few students took advantage of T.A. office hours, and multiple choice exams which required application of concepts rather than recall of facts. The consultation resulted in two interventions consisting of changes made in course structure and administration and a direct service presentation to the class.

Structural and administrative changes included the addition of study guides for each exam, sample test questions, and a change from T.A. open office hours to group study sessions facilitated by T.A's. A side effect of the consultation was a heightened awareness of student needs by the faculty. This resulted in a change from 2 exams (final and midterm) to 3 (2 midterms and a final) since students felt 2 exams were not enough.

The direct service part of the consultation consisted of a lecture presented by the Learning Center to the class during class time. Attendance at this lecture was not mandatory and did not affect student grades. No test material came from the lecture. Student turnout for the presentation varied from 125-250 people. Presentations were given by two Learning Center staff and consisted of two parts. The first presenter discussed some specifics of the course and their implication for studying. She also pointed out some advantages and disadvantages of the course module design. Students were then asked what problems they were having or anticipated having in handling the course. The second presenter addressed these problems directly and suggested specific skills. The presentation included specifics on time management, studying text books, notetaking, and preparing for and taking exams.

Results & Discussion

The main data collected from the Psych 101 classes consisted of final

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course grades. An overall course evaluation rating was also available for some quarters. Intervention began in Winter 1983. We expected the intervention to lead to an increase in grades from Fall to Winter and Spring for the 1982-83 academic year.

Table 1 shows the percentage of students receiving each grade for the 1981-82 and 1982-83 academic years. The solid lines in Figure 1 graphically represent the average grade category for each quarter. The average grade category was computed by assigning each of the letter grades a numeric value with 1 representing A and 12 representing E (failing). A 2 x 3 (year by quarter) analysis of variance on the average grades revealed a significant main effect of year, F (1,4068) = 9.13, and a quarter by year interaction, F (1,4068) = 22.05, MSe = 8.43 for all F's. The dotted line in Figure 1 represents the predicted pattern described above. This pattern was tested via a planned comparison analysis (Winer, 1971) among the 6 means. The planned comparison accounted for 65% of the total treatment variance and yielded F (1,4068) = 53.64. The intervention appears to have contributed to a significant increase in grades Winter 1983 and Spring 1983. However the residual variance, not explained by the comparison, was also significant, F (4,4068) = 7.18 and appears to be attributed to the very good grades obtained in Winter 1983 when the intervention was first introduced. It can be hypothesized that the strength of this change might be due to the Hawthorne effect during the first quarter of intervention.

We also collected data in Fall 1983 when it became available for a further test. The percentage of students receiving each grade in Fall 1982 and Fall 1983 are presented in Table 2. This is an important comparison as the majority of students during Fall are first quarter freshmen. As anticipated, there was a significant difference in average grade category between Fall 1982 and Fall 1983, t (1595) = 2.15, Se = .1534, demonstrating higher average grades for Fall 1983 after intervention began.

Students in Psych 101 provide an overall class evaluation at the end of each quarter on a five-point scale where 1 = extremely bad and 5 = extremely good. Evaluation data on this scale were only available for the 1982-83 year and for Fall 1983. The mean class evaluation for each quarter were Fall 1982,

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Table 1

Percent of students receiving each grade

Grade Category	Letter	Quarter					
		Fall '81	Winter '82	Spring '82	Fall '82	Winter '83 *	Spring '83 *
1	A	3.3	3.3	6.2	6.1	7.3	5.8
2	A-	6.1	6.3	7.1	7.2	13.3	8.3
3	B+	11.0	8.8	9.5	8.3	14.6	10.7
4	B	13.0	10.6	10.5	11.3	13.3	13.0
5	B-	13.5	16.3	10.6	10.9	13.3	13.4
6	C+	12.7	11.1	9.5	10.5	9.6	12.6
7	C	14.2	11.4	12.2	13.1	10.0	9.3
8	C-	8.3	11.4	8.7	9.0	5.4	7.8
9	D+	6.6	6.8	6.1	7.2	5.8	7.4
10	D	4.0	5.5	4.3	6.2	3.9	5.1
11	D-	2.2	2.6	2.7	2.2	1.3	3.2
12	E	5.1	6.0	7.5	8.2	2.3	3.5
N		770	615	625	809	687	568
Average Grade Category		5.95	6.21	6.00	6.20	5.02	5.71

*Intervention occurred in these quarters.

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Figure 1

Actual and predicted average grade categories

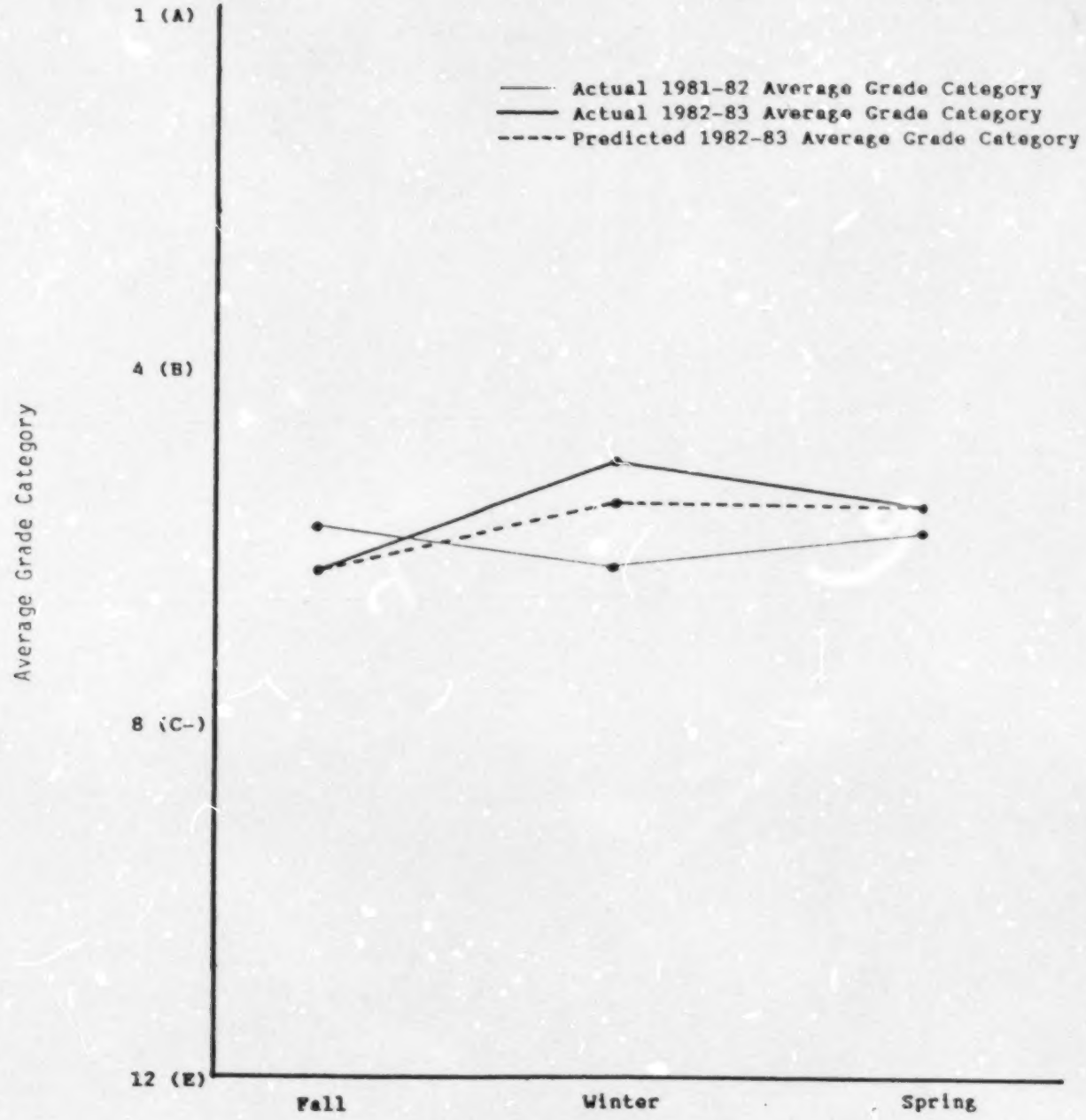

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Table 2

Percent of students receiving each letter grade for Fall 1982 and Fall 1983

Grade Category	Letter	Quarter Fall 1982	Quarter Fall 1983 *
1	A	6.1	6.5
2	A-	7.2	6.2
3	B+	8.3	11.3
4	B	11.3	12.6
5	B-	10.9	13.2
6	C+	10.5	12.6
7	C	13.1	10.4
8	C-	9.0	8.1
9	D+	7.2	5.7
10	D	6.2	2.7
11	D-	2.2	2.4
12	E	8.2	8.4
N		809	788
Average Grade Category		6.20	5.87

*Intervention occurred in this quarter.

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3.29; Winter 1983, 3.80; Spring 1983, 3.65; and Fall 1983, 3.77. Overall evaluations for the quarters after intervention began (Winter 1983, Spring 1983, Fall 1983) are obviously higher. A one-way analysis of variance yielded a significant effect of quarter, $F(3, 432) = 24.30$, $MSe = 0.67$. Newman Keuls' comparisons of the four means showed that Autumn 1982 was significantly lower than the other three quarters which did not differ among themselves.

Although we cannot attribute change to any one intervention, it is obvious that a change for the better occurred. Student performance increased in terms of higher exam scores and final grades and students seemed more satisfied with the course. For ethical reasons, the decision was made not to try to determine which interventions made the most difference. Once implemented, it did not seem fair to withhold any service. In conclusion, the overall collaborative work seemed to make a difference.

LEARNING CENTERS AS CONSULTANTS

This final section of this paper includes a description of a consultation model and suggestions for steps that a Learning Center staff can take to begin functioning as a consultant within its institution.

It is interesting to note that the Learning Center at the University of Utah was not working from a model when it began consulting with the Psychology 101 staff in the Fall of 1982. In fact, the center staff knew very little about consultation at that time. Yet the consultation was a definite success. It is possible to identify at least two factors that contributed to that success. First, looking back on the process, it is apparent that the Learning Center staff inadvertently did attend to many of the important issues which are a part of the consultation model they now employ. The following discussion of that model will cite these instances. Second, the Learning Center staff members involved in the consultation had a long standing, excellent working relationship with the Psych 101 coordinator. A major task of any consultation process involves establishing and maintaining a relationship between the consultant and the consultee that allows for trust and open communication. In this instance, the existing relationship did a great deal to promote the success of the process.

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A Model of Consultation

Figure 2 illustrates the model of consultation developed by Dr. Stephen C. Paul for the work of the University of Utah Counseling Center. The model divides the consultation process into twelve stages. The characteristics of any particular consultation will determine the attention given to each stage. However, it is important to recognize that all twelve stages exist so that critical parts of the process are not overlooked.

1. Initiation/Entry

   There are several ways that a consultation can be initiated. The two most common are as follows:

   Other-initiated entry - The Learning Center may be invited by a department or agency on campus to consult with it on a work-related problem. The Psych 101 consultation described in this paper is an example of this type of initiation.

   Self-initiated entry - The Learning Center may initiate the consultation with a department because of its own interests. For example, the Learning Center at the University of Utah might be interested in working with high risk freshmen level courses replicating the service it provided to Psych 101.

2. Early Contract

   This contract deals with the early stages of the consultation, making explicit that there is going to be some assessment of the problem before any action is taken. In the case of the Psych 101 example, this agreement was verbal rather than written. However, in most cases it is best to put this in writing, although this does not necessarily have to be a formal contract.

3. System Overview

   The Learning Center staff gather information about the system of the agency with which they are working. With the Psych 101 class, this involved identifying the course coordinator's responsibilities, the functions of the T.A.'s, and the role played by the faculty members who taught the course modules.

FIGURE 2

CONSULTATION STAGES

1	2	3	4	5	6
INITIATION/ ENTRY	EARLY CONTRACT	SYSTEM OVERVIEW	ASSESSMENT	PROBLEM FORMULATION	DETERMINATION OF ACTION

7	8	9	10	11	12
RESOURCES SELECTION	EVALUATION DEVELOPMENT	ACTION CONTRACT	ACTION IMPLEMENTATION	OUTCOME MEASUREMENT/ EVALUATION	TERMINATION

4. Assessment

A formal or informal needs assessment is performed to define problems and possible causes. In the case described in this paper, this was accomplished by talking with the coordinator and the T.A.'s about the problems that they saw students having with the course.

5. Problem Formulation

Agreement is reached between the consultant and the consultee on the definition of the problem on which they are going to collaborate. As cited in the description section of this paper, the problems identified in the Psych 101 consultation related to the inability of many of the students to employ an effective system of study with the class and the limited staff resources available to help students master the material.

6. Determination of Action

Various ways of dealing with the problems are identified and specific steps are selected to be implemented. For the Psych 101 course these included providing students with additional information about the course, instructing them in study techniques tied to the specific demands of the course, and increasing the resources available to them.

7. Resource Selection

Appropriate resources are identified to implement the actions selected in Stage 6. For Psych 101 the decision was made that some changes could be instituted by the staff of the course, while the instruction on study techniques could best be presented by members of the Learning Center staff.

8. Evaluation Development

A procedure for evaluating the action that is going to be taken should be designed at this point. This is a step that is frequently overlooked, and it was not attended to at the time that the initial consultation was conducted with the Psych 101 staff. Fortunately, the data on grade distributions and course evaluations were available after the fact in the Psychology Department records.

9. Action Contract

This second contract outlines the services that are going to be provided, by whom, to whom, for what length of time, and at what cost. It can also include a description of the evaluation procedures that are going to be employed to assess the success of the program. In the Psych 101

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consultation, this involved the changes made in the course by the Psych 101 staff and the study skills presentation to be made by the Learning Center. As in Stage 2, this was a verbal agreement, but it would be best to put it in writing.

10. Action Implementation

    At this point the actions selected in Stage 6 are taken. These could include such things as strategy changes made by consultee, delivery of a specially designed service by the consultant, or services provided by a third group. The actions taken in Psych 101 are described in an earlier section of this paper.

11. Outcome Measurement/Evaluation

    The evaluation procedures designed in Stage 8 are now carried out and the results reviewed by the consultant and consultee. The Results and Discussion section of this paper contains a description of the evaluation procedures employed in the Psych 101 case.

12. Termination

    Once the desired outcome has been achieved, the consulting relationship is terminated. In most cases, the consultation process is time-limited. However, in the work with Psych 101 the relationship continues with the study skills presentation each quarter. The Learning Center staff and the course coordinator and T.A.'s also meet periodically to assess the need for any further changes.

Preparation for the Consultation Role

Assuming that your Learning Center does not already have a functioning consultant service and that you are interested in moving in that direction, what can you do when you return to campus? The following is a description of steps which have been adapted for this paper from the work of Hamilton and Meade (1979, pp. 57-69).

To start, there are four important issues to assess. The first is the Learning Center staff's commitment to having consultation be one of its major service activities. This involves determining what assumptions the staff members make about the best ways they can be of service to students, their commitment to working with faculty and staff as well as students, and the balance they want to strike between preventive and remedial services.

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Second, the expertise of the Learning Center staff in its own areas of specialization needs to be assessed. To be determined are the topics on which the staff are interested and prepared to serve as consultant to the campus community.

The third area to be assessed is the skills and deficits of the Learning Center staff in the area of consultation. It is widely recognized that most student services personnel lack formal training on this topic. Thus it should be possible to perform this assessment without the staff feeling that their competency as professionals is being questioned. Determine what staff member have formal or informal training and experience in the area of consultation.

Finally, resources and procedures that could be used to build up the staff's skills in consultation should also be assessed. It is important to keep in mind at this point that not everyone on the staff needs to be involved in consultation. As long as there is general staff agreement that this should be a function of the Learning Center, the training and service delivery can be assumed by a core group within the staff. Some ways to gain training in consultation include:

-courses on consultation theory and practice,such as those taught in counseling psychology and psychology departments;

-practica experiences that may be available through the above courses;

-inservice training sessions conducted for the staff, drawing as speakers members of the campus community who are currently skilled consultants in their fields;

-apprenticeships in which a staff member has the opportunity to do consultation with or under the direction of a skilled consultant on campus;

-a consultant support group to read and discuss the literature in the field and to act as resources to each other as they think through the consultation activities in which they are each engaged.

After these assessments have been conducted, a model of consultation needs to be selected. The Counseling Center at the University of Utah, within which the Learning Center is located, employs as its guide to consultation the eclectic model described in the previous section of this paper. The literature is replete with descriptions of other models (Caplan, 1970; Blake

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and Moulton, 1976; Gallessich, 1982). In addition, The Personnel and Guidance Journal published two special issues on consultation in February and March of 1978, and there is a journal entitled Consultation published by the NIMH. Regardless of the model selected, its value is that it enables those doing consultation to think about and conduct the process in a systematic, planful way.

Finally, a system and procedure for administering the consultation services within the Learning Center needs to be designed. This includes designating an individual or group to coordinate the consultation requests, maintaining a thorough record-keeping procedure for consultation activities, and conducting periodic reviews of the evaluations of these efforts.

CONCLUSION

It is not meant to be implied by the authors of this paper that the consultation process is at all simple. Consultation is a complex and sophisticated specialty. Becoming an internal consultant on your campus, which is in itself a complex network of systems and subsystems, involves entering an arena loaded with ethical and political issues. Consultation tasks are frequently stressful and require large commitments of time and energy. Thus it behooves those who want to function as consultants to do it carefully, planfully, realistically.

Yet it is clearly the bias of these authors that consultation is an activity that is not only appropriate to the work of Learning Centers but can greatly enhance the contribution they can make to their institutions. The model employed by the Learning Center at the University of Utah is a coping model, not a mastery model. By this we mean that we learn from each request that we receive for services, but that we are not yet masters at consultation. We don't have all the answers about how to design an educational institution nor how to prepare students for learning, but we are willing to share what we do know about these topics, helping other professionals on campus create a more effective system.

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